

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES // INTERVIEW



In 1971, a UFO appeared on black American screens, **Sweet Sweetbacks Baadasssss Song** . Its author, **Melvin Van Peebles** , achieved the feat of making the first independent black film, without compromise, in an industry 100% controlled by whites.

To have total artistic and economic freedom, Melvin Van Peebles took on the roles of author, director, lead actor, producer, distributor and, the icing on the cake, he wrote and composed what would be the first film soundtrack alongside Earth **Wind & Fire** , to promote his work.

Meeting with an exceptional man...

INTERVIEW WITH JÉRÔME BAUCHEZ

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

Rebel without a pause, or rebel without a pose...

Tribulations and little stories of a citizen of the Other America... I think of an old Sam & Dave song: 'I thank you'... Starting with a soul clap, so against a background of light percussion punctuated by hands whose warmth will soon be applied to the dancers' legs, the Sam Moore-style intro goes: "I want everybody to get up off your sit, and get your arms together and your hands together, and give me some of that old soul clappin'!" Basically: "I want everybody to get up from their chair, join their arms and hands and give me some of that good old soul clappin'!"... Does that ring a bell? Add one or two pairs of suspenders, some boots and replace the soul clappin' with a good old moon stompin': you will get the famous invitation to the 'Skinhead Moonstomp', Symarip version... Why am I telling you all this before giving the floor to Melvin Van Peebles: a black American born in Chicago in 1932, saddled with a Dutch surname to boot? Quite simply because taking an interest in his life means untangling the threads of a damn bundle of hidden influences: the kind of connections that tirelessly build bridges between cultures... It was on the asphalt of these bridges that the skinheads danced, thanks to the soul foundations that held them together... there,

you say thank you and the circle is complete!

In short, Mr. Melvin is definitely a man of encounters and crossroads... After dressing up as a flag for Uncle Sam, he went to paint in Mexico, then he made movies, lived in Holland, in France, begged, wrote books... At the turn of the 70s, we find him single-handedly bringing Black Cinema to its baptismal font. Having become, despite himself, a protest icon, it was on Wall Street, as a trader, that he left a silver mark on the fashions of the 80s! Are you following? Tough, eh! Well, speaking of 'tough', at a time when many consider themselves 'tough guys', I suggest you read a few snippets of the story of a true representative of the genre, not easy-going, rough and ready... the complete opposite of a poser! I thank you Mr. Soul Man! (recording dates from Thursday, November 20, 2003, Fnac Strasbourg)

Melvin Van Peebles, thank you for being with us on RBS. You are the writer, director, lead actor, producer, and distributor of Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss Song, a true cinematic challenge you launched in 1971 to segregationism and the latent racism maintained, even today, by a certain America.

With this film, you opened the way for a truly independent Black cinema, and yet, despite its success, it didn't make you a rich man. Perhaps it did more. It made you one of the respected champions of the dignity and pride of Black men, and not only Black men...

As you have explained elsewhere, this film—and the refusal it expresses—did not come out of nowhere; they are the result of history working on your consciousness, and it is a few snippets of this history that I would like to share with you.

– Your personal story begins in Chicago, on August 28, 1932. You grew up in the Black ghetto of the Windy City; as a young boy, you were already very fond of movies. One thing, however, disturbed you when you looked at that window to the outside world that was the big screen: the Black characters portrayed in the films you watched were very different from the men you encountered daily in the ghetto. Could you tell us about these differences, these discrepancies, and the impact they had on you?

– You know, like any kid, I loved the movies; but sometimes, I would leave the theater feeling... I didn't know exactly what that feeling was, and finally, as I grew up a little, I realized that this feeling was shame. Because... for example: when you see a movie with Tarzan, you're for Tarzan – but there are all the other characters who look like me; not Tarzan, you understand? Or the Indians – the "Red Indians"... In fact, the "people of color" were always there to do – I must tell the truth – the "bamboulas"! Well, I got fed up with that! Often, people asked me: "Why did you get into cinema? Did something encourage you?" In fact, it was exactly the opposite: I was discouraged by the things I had seen! So, in order to change what I had seen, I made films!

– Around the mid-1950s – after 3 and a half years of military service and a stint in Korea, during which you were one of the first Black officers in the US Air Force – you spent some time in Mexico before returning to the United States, to San Francisco. It was 1957 and you were a tram driver; these cars also inspired you to write an illustrated book: The Big Heart. It was during this time that you made your first films: Sunlight and Three Pickup Men for Herrick. Why did you leave so quickly for Europe after these two attempts? What would you like to say today about this 25-year-old young man who signed his films with the name "Melvin Van"?

– First of all, there are several things... My name is quite long, so I said: “we go from Melvin Van Peebles to Melvin Van”, that’s all! You can’t make a big deal about it, you know? Otherwise, what happened was that after I made my first short films, I went to Hollywood to show my work and look for work. They saw my films and they offered me a job, but as an elevator boy... I said: “Oh no no no no, you don’t understand! I want to be in the movies!” – “Oh, wait a minute!...” They gave me a second job... as a dancer... But I wanted to be a director and a writer. So, the reason why I left America at that time was – it must be said – because I had my heart broken! You see, for me, the hardest thing about racism is that people don’t say they’re racist; they tell you, “Ah, you understand, you don’t exactly have the qualities. I can see very well that you’ll never be able to be a director.” And since none of my relatives knew anything about cinema, I had no one to ask... So I decided to devote myself to my second love: mathematics and astronomy. The type of mathematics I wanted to study was taught in Holland. Since I didn’t have much money and plane travel was very expensive at that time, I was forced to go to Europe by boat. The boat left from New York. In New York, I still had my two small reels of short film with me and I consigned them to a man who rented films, with no hope of anything! So, I went to Holland... My real name is “Melvin Van Peebles” – that’s the name on my birth certificate. Because of that name, the Dutch people who agreed to let me come thought I was Dutch too, and that I spoke Dutch! But pfff, I didn’t speak any Dutch! Well, little by little I improved and also, mathematics is numbers, so it wasn’t that difficult. But one day I came home and there I found a little letter; this letter was from the Cinémathèque Française. Mary Meerson and Henri Langlois had seen my first short films, because they had just invited this guy from New York – who was actually quite famous – to come to France to do some screenings. And, for some reason I’ll never know, Among the films he brought, he took mine! People said: “But who made those films?” - “Well, he’s a genius... blah blah blah.” The people at the Cinémathèque were very enthusiastic and so they invited me! That’s how I came to France.

And finally, if what they say is true – if Sweetback launched blaxploitation, if it really launched independent films in America – it all started with that letter! So part of the responsibility lies with France; it was thanks to France! Because little by little I learned the language and I made my first feature films here, as a Frenchman!

– As you said, Sunlight and Three Pickup Men for Herrick earned you an invitation to France by the Cinémathèque. After a stay in Holland, you arrived in Paris in 1960. You quickly became friends with another talented exile: the American writer Chester Himes...

– That’s not exactly how it happened. When I arrived here, I didn’t speak a word of French... but, there are some bad tongues who say that I still don’t speak! We’re not going to listen to them, there are always bad tongues [laughs]! They invited me, but they didn’t feed me or provide for me, you understand? No no! So I was a beggar, I begged because I had no money, nothing at all! My big songs at that time, the ones that made the most money, were “Take this Hammer” and “La Bamba”; those are the songs I sang in the street. People loved “La Bamba”...

– With the guitar?

– No no, I had another little thing called the kazoo [miming the sound of the instrument, a kind of pipe...], that’s how it is... And finally, little by little, I learned French. At the same time, there was a murder in Evreux. I spoke about it to a newspaper and they allowed me to do an investigation on it; it was a “scoop” as they say in the United States: I discovered things, etc. From then on, I worked for this newspaper – France Observateur, which is now the Nouvel Observateur – and, at one point, they sent me to do an interview with a guy who had just won the “Série Noire” prize. It was around 63-64 and this guy was Chester Himes. Later, Chester Himes got a call from a newspaper that had just started and who offered him to work for them; but he didn’t speak

French and he had other things to do, so he said to them: "I know a guy as crazy as me, maybe you want to meet him..." - the guy was me and the newspaper was Charlie Hebdo, which was called Hara Kiri at the time. That's how I worked at Hara Kiri, and that's how I met Chester Himes; it all connected, one thing to another.

- *I wanted to ask you what Chester Himes had brought you in terms of humanity and reflection...* - Well, I was always pretty broke and, several times, he paid for my meals! He invited me to dinner... - *You also adapted The Queen of Apples into a comic strip with Wolinski...*

- Yes, yes yes! But Chester was a bit like me, a bit of a loner and all that... He and I fell in love! That's the only way to put it! It was interesting... normally, when you wanted to see him, his wife - who was his bodyguard - would let you have 3 minutes, something like that... The first time I met him, she was in the next room, and she heard loud bursts of laughter! So she came in: "You have to leave!", and Chester: "No, no no! It's okay, it's okay!..." In fact, she quickly became a bit jealous, because Chester and I were really good! Lots of times, we didn't really have to say anything, we understood each other very well, we burst out laughing! That's all!

- *Despite the physical distance, your Parisian detour in the 60s seems to have made America more and more present in your mind. Some of your works, like A Bear for the FBI and, later, Permission, depict stories and questions that Black people have the right to ask of American society. Moreover, with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, and then the Black Panthers, they do so. What role...*

- Let me stop you there... not at all! That's not how it happened at all! The things I was doing were simply because at that moment I had a few minutes to sit down and write! It wasn't because I was here in France or... You don't suddenly wake up in the morning and realize that you're Black, that you're a woman or that you have a beard! You know what I mean? You've known that for a very long time! It wasn't a sudden understanding of the political connections with the underworld, the Black community, or... it wasn't like that at all! Even today, people still say to me: "Ah, you were smarter, angrier...", but no! I was exactly the same person I had always been! It wasn't a "revelation" for me at all!

- *What I meant is that, perhaps, the distance had given you - as you said - time to think. That's why I wanted to ask you what role this Parisian detour in the 1960s played in the development of your thoughts? Can we see in your work a desire on Chester's part to reflect on the relationships between minorities and majorities, beyond the sole framework of the situations encountered by Black people in the United States?* - I've already given the answer: absolutely not! That is to say, it wasn't distance or estrangement that I needed, but time, that's all! Chester, he started writing - we discussed this - in prison [laughter]! Not because he was in prison: injustice and so on... It was because he had time! Well, I had... Before that, first of all, when I was in the military, I had only one idea: to get out of it alive! And after that, I had other things to do, and other things, and other things... So, it wasn't my state of mind that changed; the only thing that changed with regard to cinema was that I had the opportunity to master the profession better and better. That's experience: you do more and more things... But it wasn't, from that, an understanding due to distance, to France, blah blah blah... not at all!

– In a book called *Blind Man with a Gun*, Chester Himes presents a story: that of a blind black man, embittered by a life of white impositions and domination. At the moment of the ultimate insult, he will no longer be able to contain his rebellion and will kill blindly, inevitably, for lack of being able to identify his enemy. Since he kills one of his brothers, this story resonates with another, older one: that of Stagger Lee. It seems to me that the character of Sweetback – who has often been compared to Stagger Lee – does more than reflect the violence he suffered. Isn't Sweetback Chester's blind man slowly regaining his sight?

– I don't make the connections with all that sort of thing! Uhh... maybe... I don't know a damn thing! I've explained it very often: I made films the way I cook; that is to say, I put in the things I like; but if other people don't like them, I have to eat them all week! Well, so what? Probably, if I were a bit of an intellectual guy, who thinks things through, I would say that it's true, that there's something there, but me... – *It's not something you particularly had in mind when you were writing this story: this kind of questioning...*

– Absolutely not, no!

– I was referring, with the character of Stagger Lee, to something that Greil Marcus – the American journalist and music critic – had written about Sweetback. He wrote a little book on Sly Stone where he makes this connection, between Stagger Lee and Sweetback... – Well yes... but I have nothing to do with it! I don't know the guy, I don't know the book [laughs]! Me, I'm here like the redneck that I was: well, I don't know shit! Well, maybe there's an affair or something but me, I allow myself the luxury of remaining a redneck! That is to say, when I went to the cinema, I didn't worry about knowing who the director was, etc. I just went to the cinema! So, I wasn't influenced that way... When I was in France - among the Americans - there was a sort of "expatriate community" of whites and blacks, which had formed; but that didn't interest me! I'm more of a loner! – *Sweetback seems to rise up as an individual against the injustices of which he is a victim and, at the same time - without claiming any particular cause -, he seems to embody a real collective rebellion. How do you explain these relationships between individual revolt and social revolt, outside of any organized movement?*

– But my explanation for that is more in experience. To put it exactly on the spot: Sweetback, at the beginning, didn't even know that he was a tool of the system. Besides, many times, people don't know, since they are part of the system! At the beginning of the film, after Sweetback hits the two cops, the young man with him says: "And what do we do now?" At that moment, you would think that Sweetback would have a broad understanding of the situation - and that's the key: a broader understanding - but he says: "'We,' my ass!" - and he leaves! Later in the film, after going left and right, after understanding how he himself was just "a pawn in their game" - as Dylan says - after understanding how he had been used by the system, he did something different! When the motorcycle guy says, "Look, there's not room for three...", Sweetback, with his embryonic political understanding, replies, "Take it from him, it's our future!" [This is a scene in the film where Sweetback chooses to save his young sidekick's life, rather than his own. The scene represents the birth of a new awareness that Sweetback has acquired through his experiences.] You see, to show these ideas, I could have created a character who was already armed with a political awareness; but most of the people I talk to in the film, like the Black community who saw the film, are more at Sweetback's political level! So I started the story at that level! You know what I mean? That way you can clearly see the journey that has been taken! That's why I did it that

way. But there's another thing you asked me—actually, you didn't ask me, I was the one who asked myself the question—when we talked about Chester and me, and all that: if I come from this and that... but no! I don't come directly from the things they wrote; but I come from the same experience! Experience, you don't have to specify it one way or another. Often people make a mistake, they make a mistake: they try to understand, not by putting their finger on the experience, but on the works themselves. But the work is only a second degree—like Plato's Myth of the Cave... For example, with Chester, we had an immediate understanding...

– *You didn't need to read other accounts of experience, since you had the experience...*

– Yes, but exactly! And that book, *The Blind Man*, I've never actually read it! But I had the same experience, the same kind of experience, you know? It's a much broader approach: it wasn't Stagger Lee, it wasn't ta ta ta ta... For example, in *Sweetback*, about the scene where the cops are beating people up, there were people who said to me: "Oh no, it's not possible, the police have never been like that!" Well, 15 years later, there was Rodney King... The only difference was that there was someone with a video, otherwise everyone would have continued to say: "Oh no no, that never happens!" But Chester, me and many others, we had that experience! So, I don't have to consider how this experience was, for example, put into a book, because Chester, I and others saw the same things and we have roughly the same feeling. That's all!

– *Just like the film, the music that accompanies Sweetback has remained famous, especially the main theme, which is a little jazz-funk gem performed by Earth Wind & Fire, the first band. The Sweetback soundtrack is not your first compositional achievement. There was another album before that: Brer Soul in 1968. On that record, you chant lyrics over a jazz-funk background – a bit like what people like Gil Scott-Heron or the Last Poets would do; which makes you, according to journalists from Billboard in particular, a precursor of rap. However, just like your film Sweetback, spoken words and what has been called "rap" did not come out of nowhere, or fall from the sky. From Count Matchuki's toast to Jamaican sound systems of the 50s, to Jocko Henderson's Rocket Ship via the soul of Joe Tex, "rap" is more of a culmination, a synthesis, than a UFO emerging musically from the turntables of Kool Herc or vocally from Brer Soul. In short, how would you present the synthesis of cultures that allowed the emergence of what we call "rap", and what meaning does this word have for you?*

– Once again: I did things, I don't have to explain them! When I came back to the United States in '67, I was struck by the fact that there were very few lyrics in music that talked about current events, riots and all that. I wanted to help change that; so, I first tried to use the formats that existed, that is to say, blues, spirituals and all that... but it wasn't "urban" enough for me. So, I said to myself: "I'm going to invent a way to time the lyrics, not only on the melody, but also on the tempo, on the beat." And that became my rap: "Come on feet, Good for Me, Trouble and no place to be..." (Come on feet, Good for me, Trouble and no place to be...). I found that music was a great way to warn the public about the things that are happening to them, quite simply! I've always thought that music is very important to the Black community. That's why the film isn't just called "Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss," but "Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss Song"! Because I consider this film an opera! It's like an opera to me. At one point, there are black angels talking to Sweetback, the "black angels on duty": "Ah Sweetback don't do that, you mustn't... ba ba ba." Sweetback is so tenacious, so stubborn that he continues anyway! And his strength, finally, manages to produce a change in the black angels; they become militant: "Yeah! Go Sweetback, run, run!" (Yeah, go Sweetback, run, run!) And that's what we can do with our strength! But, to come back to Sweetback's music, again I had this huge luck, another fairy tale: my secretary was the girlfriend of someone who played in a band and she said to me: "My boyfriend is in a band right now, do you want to listen?" And that was Earth, Wind & Fire. That's how I came across Earth, Wind & Fire! It was their first album! They were starving in a little place on Hollywood Boulevard, all in the same room, you know... Well, that's how we met.

– *Whether we are referring to American ghettos or other places – like in France for example, where people refuse to use this term to describe certain situations of segregation – who do you think are today's Sweetbacks and what are their struggles?*

– I don't know! It's not my area! I keep fighting and I hope others will! But my first rule is: "Don't write a check with your mouth your ass can't cash" – "Don't write a check with your mouth that you can't pay with your ass" – not everyone's ass, eh! So I don't worry about looking for it from others, I keep fighting myself!

– *Okay. Thank you very much, Melvin Van Peebles, for the time you gave us!* – Oh, you're welcome!



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